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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 06 TEL AVIV 001896

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SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

Mideast

Key stories in the media:

Saturday evening, Channel 2-TV revealed that State Attorney Edna Arbel recommends that PM Sharon and his son Gilad be indicted for their involvement in the so-called "Greek island affair" -- allegedly receiving bribes from the businessman David Appel. The media reported that Sunday Arbel passed on her recommendations to A/G Menachem Mazuz's office. Mazuz reportedly believes that Arbel's dossier on Sharon is "problematic." Ministers from every party in the coalition were quoted as saying privately that Sharon would not be able to remain in power if he is indicted, even though the law would not force him to resign.

During the weekend, the media reported that President Bush is scheduled to receive Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on April 12, two days before Sharon, and Jordan's King Abdullah on April 21.

Sharon's disengagement plan:
-Ha'aretz (Aluf Benn) cited the draft of a U.S. document presented last week to the Israeli delegation led by top Sharon aide Dov Weisglass, in which the U.S. Administration reportedly refuses to recognize the concept of "settlement blocs" in the West Bank in exchange from Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and some northern West Bank settlements. Ha'aretz quoted various sources as saying that the U.S. is looking into a formula that would not involve an Israeli withdrawal to the 1949 armistice lines (the "Green Line"). The newspaper also cited the sources as saying that the U.S. Administration is not prepared to declare that Palestinian refugees are only entitled to return to a future Palestinian state. (Maariv filed a similar report on Sunday.) Ha'aretz further quoted its sources as saying that the U.S. Administration has presented to Israel three alternatives for a "declaration of exchange" (in decreasing preference order): an exchange of missives between the two governments; a declaration by Bush at the conclusion of his talks with Sharon; and a joint Bush-Sharon declaration. Sunday, Jerusalem Post quoted senior Israeli diplomatic officials as saying nothing in Israel's disengagement plan will preempt the possibility of continuing the road map when the Palestinians fulfill their commitments under the map; namely, dismantling the terrorist infrastructure. -Leading media reported that Sunday, at a meeting of the Likud cabinet ministers, FM Silvan Shalom criticized Sharon's withdrawal plan, telling him that a peace agreement should only be reached in agreement with the Palestinians, to which Sharon allegedly replied: "You said at the UN that there is a moderate partner in the PA. Tell me, is there anyone to talk to?" -Maariv quoted Sharon associates as saying that Gilad Sharon is the key promoter of the idea of disengagement from the Palestinians.

Ha'aretz reported that Egypt is leading an initiative designed to create a Palestinian leadership that will participate actively in negotiations and play a role in implementing the Gaza Strip disengagement plan proposed by Sharon. The newspaper reported that the Egyptian plan will enable the immediate operation of the Palestinian security apparatus in the Gaza Strip due to Egyptian-Palestinian fears of a Hamas escalation

in the territories and Israel in the wake of the assassination last week of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin.

All media reported that the special Knesset committee investigating the performance of Israel's intelligence agencies in the lead-up to the Iraq war and during the invasion found that the intelligence establishment's determinations regarding Saddam Hussein's non-conventional capabilities and the existence of ground-to-ground missiles in Iraq was based largely on speculation rather than reliable information. The media cited the committee as warning that the intelligence services could once again turn out to be a "broken reed." However, the panel's report does not recommend action against any individuals.

During the weekend, the media reported that three Palestinians were killed in the West Bank Saturday, including a seven-year-old boy caught in crossfire between IDF soldiers and Palestinian militants.

Sunday, Ha'aretz reported that Hizbullah financed the Ashdod Port bombing and chose the attack's target. The newspaper also reported that in order to counter Hizbullah influence, PA Chairman Yasser Arafat is funding military activists in the Fatah.

Jerusalem Post and other media reported that Sunday Hamas leader Abdel Aziz Rantisi attacked the U.S. for vetoing a UN resolution condemning the killing of his predecessor, Ahmed Yassin, and described Bush as an enemy of God and Islam.

Jerusalem Post and Israel Radio reported that the Arab League will hold its summit in Cairo in mid-April, following the cancellation of the meeting it was scheduled to hold in Tunis in current days. In an unrelated development, Ha'aretz reported that Israeli Arab politicians and academics will attend the Arab League's first conference devoted to the Arab minority in Israel and its connections to the wider Arab world. Ha'aretz cited the belief of Arab politicians that the conference, to be held in Cairo on April 26 and 27, will enhance Israeli Arabs' standing in the world Arab community.

Yediot, Ha'aretz and Maariv reported that U.S. visa procedures for Israelis born in Arab countries have been eased. They will now be asked if they have any connection with their birthplace. If it is determined that all connections have been cut and the visa applicant is considered loyal to "Israel only," their application will be more quickly authorized and their visas will be issued at the American missions in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. Yediot writes that the U.S. informed the Israeli Embassy in Washington about this change during the weekend.

All media reported that Sunday a ministerial committee decided to reform the reserve system in the IDF.

During the weekend, all media reported on worldwide demonstrations of Muslims to protest Yassin's assassination. Sunday, Jerusalem Post reported that Hamas and the armed wing of Fatah, Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, have separately rejected an appeal by a group of prominent Palestinians for a "peaceful" Intifada and vowed to step up their attacks against Israel.

Maariv cited a London Sunday Times story that Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi planned to use a Palestinian terrorist squad to hijack a Pan Am airliner and blow it up above Tel Aviv in 1986.

All media reported that Sunday NASA launched the X-34A plane, which can reach the speed of about 8,000 kph (Mach 7).

Sunday, Yediot cited the results of a poll taken in the U.S. by Public Opinion Strategies pollster Neil Newhouse on behalf of the Foreign Ministry: -46 percent of Americans approve Yassin's assassination; 61 percent approve it when Osama bin Laden is mentioned in the same breath; however, 50 percent of respondents believe that the assassination will increase terrorism in the Middle East throughout the world. -38 percent of Americans believe that the goal of Palestinian terrorism is the elimination of Israel; 38 percent believe that it is more limited: the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

Jerusalem Post cited the results of a poll taken between March 14 and 17 (before Yassin's assassination) by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research among Palestinians, and published Sunday: -Nearly three quarters of respondents welcome Sharon's

plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip, and two thirds believe it constitutes a victory for the armed struggle against Israel.

-However, 61 percent of Palestinians believe that Sharon is not serious about his plan and that he will not withdraw, while only one third believes he is serious.

Mideast:

Summary:

Conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized: "The extent to which an indictment seems likely could directly impair Sharon's ability to convince the U.S. to take specific diplomatic steps critical to our national interests."

Senior Middle East affairs analyst Zvi Bar'el wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz: "Anyone who fears the expression 'Israel's expulsion' had better get used to it. Yes, Israel will leave Gaza as one being expelled."

Liberal columnist Gideon Levy wrote in Ha'aretz: "Suddenly, Israelis are worried about the bitter fate of a Palestinian child."

Arab affairs commentator Danny Rubinstein wrote in Ha'aretz: "The Palestinians had few expectations of the summit, and no one is losing sleep over its postponement."

Block Quotes:

I. "Not Above the Law"

Conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized (March 29): "Leaks from the police and prosecutors regarding high-profile political cases have become common and acceptable, as if it were an appropriate way to release information.... [But] even Ariel Sharon has civil rights. The public has a right not to have its government weakened by leaks that unnecessarily prolong a period of instability.... On April 14, Sharon is scheduled to meet with U.S. President George W. Bush. Though the cloud of this scandal is already over Sharon, the extent to which an indictment seems likely could directly impair Sharon's ability to convince the U.S. to take specific diplomatic steps critical to our national interests. This is no argument to obstruct a legitimate legal process, but another example of the cost of illegal and unacceptable leaks from our legal guardians."

II. "Yes, They're Kicking Us Out"

Senior Middle East affairs analyst Zvi Bar'el wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz (March 28): "It would be best to look at this withdrawal -- which is still only on paper -- directly in the eyes. Israel is only leaving Gaza because it can no longer continue to hold it due to the defense burden. Anyone who fears the expression 'Israel's expulsion' had better get used to it. Yes, Israel will leave Gaza as one being expelled, without any pomp and ceremonies marking the transfer of power. It's difficult to find in modern history the case of an occupying state that does not leave as one being expelled from the territory it conquered. It is not a dishonorable club, with members including Britain, France, and the United States. The truly important question is what are the memories that Israel will leave behind. These memories will play an important role when the time for reconciliation comes. But thinking about the future is not a characteristic of Israeli policy. If it were, Gaza would long ago have become an autonomous district under the control of the Palestinian Authority."

III. "A Sudden Concern For the Palestinian Child"

Liberal columnist Gideon Levy wrote in Ha'aretz (March 28): "Suddenly, Israelis are worried about the bitter fate of a Palestinian child. To judge by the public shock over Husam Bilal Abdu, who was caught wearing an explosives belt at the Hawara checkpoint, it would seem that nothing of a humane nature is foreign to us, even when it pertains to an enemy and his children. But this is an infuriating show of concern. The fate of a Palestinian child only touches us when it suits us, when it serves our purposes and when our hands are not

involved. The hundreds of children who have been killed, the thousands who have been crippled, and the hundreds of thousands who live under conditions of siege and poverty, and are exposed every day to violence and humiliation -- all this has failed to move the Israeli public. Just the child with the belt.... Whoever is truly concerned over the fate of Palestinian children should not only take interest when explosives belts are attached to their bodies. These children deserve a different fate. They deserve not to grow up among the rubble of their homes as children and be killed as teenagers -- whether from a Palestinian explosives belt or from the bullet of an Israeli sniper. Both of these are cruel to exactly the same extent."

IV. "No Lost Sleep Over the Postponed Summit"

Arab affairs commentator Danny Rubinstein wrote in Ha'aretz (March 29): "One factor that has somewhat disrupted preparations for this [Arab League] summit was the assassination of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. Most Palestinians derived great pleasure from scenes of the demonstrations against Israel and the U.S., some of them violent, which took place throughout the Arab world after Yassin's death. Such demonstrations always become protests against rulers of the country in which they take place, who are asked to break off any contact, direct or indirect, with Israel. The Prime Minister's disengagement plan, which confounded the Palestinians, is confounding Arab leaders, too.... If in the past, Arab summit conferences were a subject that sparked excitement and enthusiasm among the Palestinian public and its leadership, today's summit was conceived as a routine, ho-hum event. Arafat was supposed to give one of his ordinary speeches, and the Arab spokesmen had prepared a few mutual verbal barbs. The Palestinians had few expectations of the summit, and no one is losing sleep over its postponement."

KURTZER